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The Sanchi Stupa

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The Sanchi Stupa

Practice: 5 MCQs



The Great Stupa (Stupa 1) at Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh. Photo by Suvro Banerjee, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.

The Great Stupa at Sanchi is a solid stone dome in Madhya Pradesh. Ashoka began it in the 3rd century BCE. Later dynasties added the casing, the carved gates and the shrines.

This page covers what a stupa is and how Sanchi grew. It explains why the Buddha appears as symbols. It also shows what the gates carry and how the site survived.

- **Builder: Ashoka**, 3rd century BCE, in brick.
- **Later additions:** Sunga casing, Satavahana gateways, Gupta shrines.
- **Art:** the Buddha shown as **symbols**, not a person.

- **Rediscovery:** General Taylor, 1818; restored by Marshall, 1912 to 1919.

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1. What is a stupa, and why is there one at Sanchi?

1.1 What is a stupa?

A **stupa** is a solid, dome-shaped Buddhist monument. It holds sacred remains, called **relics**, such as the Buddha's ashes. You cannot go inside it.

Devotees walk around it instead. This walk is called **circumambulation**. It is a form of prayer on foot, and the walkway is the **pradakshina patha**.

The top of a stupa has three parts. A rod called the **yasti** rises from the dome. A fence called the **harmika** surrounds it. Umbrella-shaped **chattras** crown it.

The four doorways in the surrounding wall are the **toranas**. Each one is a carved stone gateway.

1.2 Why did Ashoka build one at Sanchi?

Legend says Emperor Ashoka built 84,000 stupas. That number is legend. Ashoka did build many stupas across northern India.

The Great Stupa stands at Sanchi, a village in central India.

Here is a surprise. The Buddha never visited Sanchi. UNESCO says so directly. The site is sacred because of its relics, not because of one event in his life.

Stupa 3 held the relics of Sariputra, one of his chief disciples. UNESCO names Maudgalyayana as another disciple honoured here.

Sources:

- World History Encyclopedia, Stupa
- UNESCO, Buddhist Monuments at Sanchi
- World History Encyclopedia, Sanchi Stupa Gate

2. How did Stupa 1 grow over the centuries?

Who added what at Sanchi

Ashoka, 3rd c. BCE

The first brick stupa

Sungas, 184 to 72 BCE

Stone casing, walkways, railings

Satavahanas, c. turn of era

Carved toranas (gateways)

Guptas, 5th c. CE

Four shrines at the entrances

Based on the sources below.

Four rulers, four additions at Stupa 1. Original explanatory diagram.

2.1 Who built the stone stupa?

Ashoka's stupa dates to the 3rd century BCE. The Sunga dynasty (184 to 72 BCE) enlarged it. They covered it with a stone casing and added walkways and railings.

The railing is the **vedika**. Its stone medallions show lotuses and other motifs. Remember this order: Ashoka first, Sungas second.

2.2 Who added the carved gateways?

UNESCO says the four toranas were later ornamented under the Satavahana dynasty. It dates this to the 1st century CE. The V&A museum also dates the gateways to the 1st century CE.

Other sources place the carving a little earlier. One inscription on the southern gateway names Ananda, foreman of the artisans of King Satakarni of the Satavahanas. That king is dated to the 1st century BCE.

So the safe date is around the turn of the era. Sources differ by a few decades.

2.3 What came last?

The last big addition came in the 5th century CE, under the Gupta dynasty. They added four shrines at the four entrances.

Sources:

- UNESCO, Buddhist Monuments at Sanchi (section 2)
- Tribune India, Sanchi
- V&A, Sanchi front view
- Puratattva, Sanchi
- ISAW, Salabhanjika Yakshi at Sanchi

The Sungas built the original brick stupa at Sanchi.

Think it through: why do sources give different dates for the gateways?

The gateways were carved over time. The inscription names a king, not a year. UNESCO and the V&A say the 1st century CE. Another source dates the king to the 1st century BCE. So say: around the turn of the

era.

3. Why does early art not show the Buddha's face?

3.1 What is aniconism?

Look at the oldest carvings. You will not find the Buddha as a person. Early Buddhist artists used symbols instead. This habit is called **aniconism**, meaning art without a human image of the Buddha.

3.2 Which symbols stood in for him?

Early reliefs used these stand-ins:

- An **empty seat**, where he sat or was honoured.
- **Footprints**, for his presence.
- A **parasol**, for his protection, sometimes over an empty space.
- His **eyes**, or animals tied to his life.

One common reading links the four gates to four events in his life. These are birth, enlightenment, first sermon and death (nirvana). Treat this as a reading, not a fact.

3.3 When did human images begin?

In the 1st century CE, human images of the Buddha began to dominate. One of the first sites was Gandhara, on India's northwestern frontier. Kushana-period artists at Mathura made a different human image.

Sources:

- Met Museum, Buddhism and Buddhist Art
- World History Encyclopedia, Sanchi Stupa Gate (section 3)
- World History Encyclopedia, Stupa (section 3)

Early Buddhist artists at Sanchi showed the Buddha as a person.

4. What is carved on the gateways?

4.1 Which stories do the gates tell?

The gates are covered with **Jataka** tales. These are stories of the Buddha's earlier births. A panel on the lower architrave of the northern gateway tells the Vessantara Jataka.

In it, Prince Vessantara gives away his children and wife. At the end, the god Indra restores them to him.

4.2 What is the Shalabhanjika?

The **Shalabhanjika** is a woman who holds the branch of a tree. A famous one stands on the bracket of the eastern gateway, dated 1st century BCE to 1st century CE.

Google Arts and Culture links her to women, trees and fertility in early Indian art. She is decoration. She is not a symbol of the Buddha's life like the empty seat or footprints.

4.3 Who is the woman with elephants?

A different relief on the railing shows the goddess Lakshmi. Elephants pour water over her. This is a separate figure from the Shalabhanjika. Do not mix them up.



A carved torana (gateway) of Stupa 1 at Sanchi. Photo by Rohit Sharma, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.

Sources:

- Photo Dharma, North Gate of Stupa 1
- Tribune India, Sanchi (section 4)

- ISAW, Salabhanjika Yakshi at Sanchi (section 4)
- Google Arts and Culture, The Salabhanjikas

The Shalabhanjika is a symbol of an event in the Buddha's life.

Think it through: why is the Shalabhanjika not a Buddhist symbol like the empty seat?

The empty seat and footprints stand for the Buddha himself. The Shalabhanjika is a fertility motif from early Indian art. It was used as decoration.

5. How did Sanchi survive?

5.1 What happened after 1818?

The site was abandoned for about 600 years. A British officer, General Taylor, found it in 1818. Three of four gateways still stood. The southern gateway had fallen.

Treasure hunters soon followed. In 1822 a Captain Johnson cut open one side of the stupa. The damage was so great that even the western gateway later collapsed.

5.2 Who restored it?

Restoration began in 1881. The main campaign ran from 1912 to 1919 under Sir John Marshall, Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India.

UNESCO listed the Buddhist Monuments at Sanchi as a World Heritage Site in 1989.

Sources:

- UNESCO, Buddhist Monuments at Sanchi (section 5)
- Live History India, Rediscovering Sanchi

- V&A, Sanchi front view (section 5)
- MP Tourism, Built by an emperor

6. Which previous-year question tests this topic?

How has Sanchi been tested?

The answer is (a). The empty seat stood in for the Buddha in early art. Section 3 explains these symbols.

Asked before

PYQ 1 · CDS (I) 2022, Q50

Which of the following statements about sculptures at Sanchi is/are correct? 1. In some sculptures there is representation of Shalabhanjika. 2. The figure of Shalabhanjika is represented by a woman surrounded by lotuses and elephants. 3. The Shalabhanjika motif was not directly inspired by Buddhist ideas. Select the correct answer using the code given below :

(a) 1, 2 and 3
(b) 2 and 3 only
(c) 2 only
(d) 1 and 3 only

mcqquestion.com/articles/cds-i-2022-general-knowledge-full-question-paper/#q50

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The answer is (d). The woman with elephants is a different figure, Lakshmi. Statement 2 is wrong.

Asked before

PYQ 2 · NDA & NA (I) 2025, Q54

Which one of the following sculptures found at Sanchi Stupa is NOT directly inspired by Buddhist ideas?

(a) Empty seat
(b) Shalbhanjika
(c) Tree
(d) Wheel

mcqquestion.com/nda-na/nda-na-1-2025-general-ability-full-question-paper/#q54

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The answer is (b). The empty seat is a Buddhist symbol. The Shalabhanjika is decoration from early Indian art.

Your understanding checks

Your 3 quick checks Answered 0 of 3 · Correct 0
This score resets when the page reloads.

Practice: 5 MCQs

Practice MCQs

1. Who originally built the Great Stupa at Sanchi, in brick, during the 3rd century BCE?

A. Ashoka

B. Chandragupta Maurya

C. Kanishka

D. Bindusara

See answer ↓

2. What is the prayer walk that devotees make around a stupa called?

A. Sallekhana

B. Upasampada

C. Circumambulation

D. Vihara

See answer ↓

3. What is early Buddhist art that avoids showing the Buddha as a person called?

A. Aniconic art

B. Gandhara art

C. Realism

D. Iconoclasm

See answer ↓

4. Under which dynasty were the four toranas of Stupa 1 carved, according to UNESCO?

A. Sunga

B. Gupta

C. Kushana

D. Satavahana

See answer ↓

5. Which British officer found the abandoned Sanchi site in 1818?

A. John Marshall

B. General Taylor

C. Alexander Cunningham

D. James Prinsep

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **A.**
   The correct answer is **Ashoka**. Ashoka built the first Great Stupa at Sanchi in the 3rd century BCE. It was a plain brick dome.
   Chandragupta and Bindusara were Mauryan kings before him. Kanishka was a Kushana king, centuries later. Later dynasties added the stone casing and the gates.
   Memory hook: Ashoka = brick core; later kings = stone and gates.
   ↑ Q1
2. **C.**
   The correct answer is **circumambulation**. A stupa is solid, so nobody goes inside. Devotees walk around it on a path called the pradakshina patha.
   Upasampada is a monk's ordination. Sallekhana is a Jain fast. A vihara is a monastery.
   Memory hook: Stupa = walk around, not inside.
   ↑ Q2
3. **A.**
   The correct answer is **aniconic art**. Early artists used symbols such as an empty seat, footprints or a parasol. The word aniconic means without a human image.
   Iconoclasm means destroying images. Gandhara art is where human images of the Buddha became common, later.
   Memory hook: Aniconic = symbols, no face.
   ↑ Q3
4. **D.**
   The correct answer is **the Satavahanas**. UNESCO says the four toranas were ornamented under the Satavahanas. The Sungas added the stone casing and railings. The Guptas added four shrines.
   Each wrong option built a different part of Sanchi. Dating differs by a few decades across sources, but all agree on the Satavahanas.
   Memory hook: Sungas = casing; Satavahanas = gates; Guptas = shrines.
   ↑ Q4

5. **B.**
   The correct answer is **General Taylor**. He found Sanchi in 1818 after about 600 years of abandonment. Three of the four gateways were still standing.
   John Marshall led the main restoration from 1912 to 1919. Cunningham and Prinsep were not the officer who found Sanchi in 1818.
   Memory hook: 1818 Taylor finds; 1912-19 Marshall restores.
   ↑ Q5

Previous year answers

1. **(d) 1 and 3 only** Sanchi's sculptures show the Shalabhanjika, a pre-Buddhist fertility motif. A woman surrounded by lotuses and elephants is a different figure, Gajalakshmi.
2. **(b) Shalbhanjika** The empty seat, the tree and the wheel are Buddhist symbols. They stand for the Buddha, his enlightenment and his first sermon. The Shalabhanjika is a woman figure from an older fertility tradition. It later became a decoration in Buddhist art. It is not a Buddhist symbol.

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